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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000444

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (HOPKINS AND HARRIS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/05/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER "REVOLTED" BY "UNJUST" WHITE  
HOUSE STATEMENT ON WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

REF: A. TUNIS 434

[1](#)B. TUNIS 408

[1](#)C. TUNIS 407

[1](#)D. 07 TUNIS 986

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) The Foreign Minister summoned the Ambassador on May 5 to complain that the White House Statement commemorating World Press Freedom day had been "revolting" and "unfair" in likening the press freedom situation in Tunisia to that in countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, China, and North Korea. He asserted that no journalist has been imprisoned for his writing during President Ben Ali's 20 years in office. He also denied that journalists have been harassed or newspapers banned. The Minister spoke with conviction and appeared genuinely shocked by the statement. He questioned whether Tunisia was being punished for something, since he noticed that countries like Morocco escaped mention. The Ambassador made clear to the FM that while we had noted progress in some areas, Tunisia still had problems on press freedom, providing several specific examples. He then underscored the importance the United States generally attaches to freedom of expression. He offered to provide the Minister with a non-paper detailing specific US concerns. The Minister accepted. End Summary.

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In Bad Company  
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[1](#)2. (C) Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah convoked Ambassador Godec for a May 5 meeting to express disappointment over the May 1 Statement by the President about World Press Freedom Day. (Note: The White House statement condemned "the harassment, physical intimidation, persecution, and other abuse" that journalists face in several countries that were mentioned by name, including Tunisia.) At several points throughout the meeting, Abdallah referred to the statement as "revolting" and "unjust," and he described his own reaction as "revolted," and "very, very, very disappointed." Abdallah also complained that the timing was "extremely curious," since the statement came on the heels of favorable reviews of Tunisia's human rights record at the United Nations in both New York and Geneva, as well as the recent visit of French President Sarkozy, in which Sarkozy credited Tunisia with making progress (Ref A).

[1](#)3. (C) Abdallah took particular umbrage over the fact that Tunisia was mentioned in the same statement as Cuba, China, Venezuela, Vietnam, and North Korea, among others. "What do we have in common with North Korea? We are not communists or authoritarian." Meanwhile, he said, it had not escaped his attention that "certain countries close by with journalists

in prison" were not on the list. "Do you know how many journalists are in prison in Morocco?" he asked rhetorically. Abdallah challenged the Ambassador to "name one example of a journalist in prison for what he wrote," asserting that there had been no such case in the 20 years of Ben Ali's rule. Nor, he said, had there been harassment of journalists or any newspapers banned. "Al-Mowqif has never been blocked or seized," he maintained. He emphasized that the defamation cases faced by al-Mowqif are civil cases, which the businessmen who were slandered for selling substandard vegetable oil were within their right to bring in this "liberal, market-based economy."

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Why? Why? Are We Being Punished?  
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¶4. (C) Abdallah said that he has been asking himself why President Bush decided to treat Tunisia so unjustly. "Are we not friendly countries?" he asked. The Ambassador responded that the United States and Tunisia are allies, but that even friends sometimes have differences. Running through a mental catalogue of possible explanations for this "injustice," the Minister wondered whether President Bush really believes the "lies" spouted by non-governmental organizations. "Maybe there are people who work against Tunisia at the White House," he continued. He went on to question whether Tunisia was being punished for Ben Ali's attendance at the Arab League Summit in Damascus. Finally, Abdallah mused that US motivation couldn't have been for lack of cooperation on security matters, since our relations in this area have been "constant."

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The Real Reasons  
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¶5. (C) The Ambassador undertook to convey Abdallah's concerns to Washington. He also pointed out areas in which we have noted some progress in freedom of the press, i.e., increased room for debate in some media outlets; the end of depot legal (the GOT's prior review of publications), and President Ben Ali's stated commitment to freedom of expression in recent speeches. Even so, the Ambassador continued, the USG remains troubled by the press situation in Tunisia and by some specific cases reflecting a lack of freedom. He offered to personally provide to the FM a non-paper laying out such concerns. Abdallah indicated that he would welcome such a document.

¶6. (C) Picking up on Abdallah's challenge to name one case in which a journalist had been imprisoned for his writing, the Ambassador referred to the case of Mohamed Abbou (Ref D). Abdallah did not deny that Abbou had been imprisoned for his writing, but he did point out that one of the charges against Abbou had been for assaulting a female colleague. The Ambassador also raised the difficulties experienced by opposition newspaper al-Mowqif, the blockage of numerous websites for their political content, and the online magazine "Kalima," the registration of which has been blocked after numerous attempts (Refs B and C). Abdallah responded with the oft-repeated GOT refrain that the only websites it blocks are those that contain pornographic material, and those that are linked to terrorism. The Ambassador made clear that the USG has no issue with blocking access to terrorist sites, but he pointed out that many other sites are blocked, including YouTube, a site Abdallah had never heard of. (Note: He claimed not to know how to turn on a computer.) The Ambassador emphasized that freedom of expression is a matter of great importance to the White House, the US Government, and the American people.

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Comment

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17. (C) The Foreign Minister was dour and melodramatic throughout the meeting, and he spoke with the conviction of someone who truly believes there have been no abuses in Tunisia. Although the appointment was originally made with the Foreign Minister's Chief of Staff Mahmoud Khmeri, the Foreign Minister ended up delivering the message himself, probably to underscore the importance he attached to it. Embassy will put together a non-paper to share with Abdallah that details our concerns related to freedom of expression, and will report any reaction. End Comment.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>  
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